

“They want not only to hand over the bricks but also to lay them in place themselves”:

Expectations and Experience of Women in the Labor Zionist Movement

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Until the 1970s, Labor Zionism was the leading social and political movement attempting to establish and maintain the State of Israel. Labor Zionists from all over the world combined their hopes for a Jewish state in their ancient homeland with socialist ideology and a vision of a workers' utopia. Their branch in the United States trained youths for settlement in Israel while supporting progressive domestic policies. As a staunchly progressive movement working towards a bold future of equality, the Labor Zionists rejected many facets of traditional life. In envisioning their utopia, the Labor Zionists saw a world in which both men and women were equal. They sought to reorganize the family and recognize the dignity of women's labor.¹

This paper explores the differing expectations set for men and women in the Labor Zionist Movement before 1948 in order to help understand the role gender played in the ideology of Zionist pioneering. It draws upon two collections of primary sources from the American Habonim movement, *Arise and Build* and *Builders and Dreamers*, as well as a collection of accounts compiled by the Pioneer Women's Organization entitled *The Plough Woman*. These sources are supplemented by interviews with members of the Habonim movement who have been active since the 1940s. From these sources, arises a complex picture in which the behavior of Labor Zionists rarely lives up to their lofty aspirations. Despite the movement's radical egalitarian rhetoric, women in the Labor Zionist Movement were often held to higher work standards than their male comrades and had to fight for their right to be included in all types of labor and to be taken seriously in their own right.

¹ Mark A. Raider, "Girded for the Superhuman Task: American Jews and the Trope of the Zionist Pioneer, 1925–1956." *American Jewish History* 103, no. 3 (2009): 321.

Labor Zionism emphasized a return to the land as a way to restore the dignity of the Jewish people. To this end they established training farms in the United States to prepare young Zionists for life in Palestine. In the Mandate of Palestine, the chief institution of the Labor Zionists was the *kibbutz*, a collective agricultural settlement. On the *kibbutzim*, all were supposed to be equals, yet the actual experiences of many pioneers differed markedly from this idealistic vision. Women often joined the *kibbutzim* expecting to work in the fields but found themselves relegated to the tasks traditionally reserved for women, and when women did go to work in the fields, they almost invariably still had to fulfil their traditional roles as well.²

Deborah Bernstein was the first scholar to study the experiences of women workers in Mandatory Palestine, but her work focused on women in the cities and neglected the experiences of women on the influential *kibbutzim*; furthermore, her work did not look specifically at the dominant Labor Zionist Movement and dealt only with the struggle of women for equality rather than upon their expectations of equality.³ Her work was more interested in the sexual and social freedoms gained by Jewish women in Palestine in the early 1920s and the reassertion of male dominance later in the decade. Despite her focus on workers, Bernstein's research focused on political, social, and sexual relationships between men and women rather than on questions of labor. Lilach Rosenberg-Friedman has conducted research on marriage and family in both the Labor and Religious Zionist Movements, topics closely related to questions of women's

2 Marie Syrkin, foreword to *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine* ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), xxi.

3 Deborah Bernstein. *The struggle for Equality: Urban Women Workers in Pre-state Israeli Society*. (New York: Praeger, 1987).

equality, but has not examined either the expectations or experiences of women when it comes to the division of labor.⁴ Matan Boord examines the same issues of marriage and family in Mandatory Palestine through the lens of masculinity.⁵ Pnina Lahav examines the fight for women's equality within the Labor Movement through the case study of Golda Meir and her work at the Women Workers' Council but looks at the political dimension of the struggle rather than at the personal level.⁶ Shulamit Reinharz and Mark Raider take a similar political view of women in the Mandate, focusing primarily on older high ranking and influential women rather than on the experiences of the young Labor Zionist pioneers working to establish the new state.⁷ This paper focuses on the experiences of the young women of the Labor Movement who immigrated to Palestine to participate in the building of an optimistic new society. It examines their expectations of gender equality in the project of nation building and contrasts those expectations with their experiences. In doing so, the paper remains focused on questions of labor and how it was divided between men and women rather than on concerns of politics, family or sexuality.

A variety of movement publications that depicted a vision of settlement in pre-state Palestine in terms that were more ideological than realistic shaped the expectations of women in the Labor Zionist movement. One such movement primer was

4 Lilach Rosenberg-Friedman. *Dynamics of Gender Borders: Women in Israel's Cooperative Settlements*. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017).

5 Matan Boord. "Creating the Labor-Zionist Family: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Marriage in Mandate Palestine." *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 3 (2017): 38–67.

6 Pnina Lahav. "A Great Episode in the History of Jewish Womanhood': Golda Meir, the Women Workers' Council, Pioneer Women, and the Struggle for Gender Equality." *Israel Studies* 23, no. 1 (2018): 1–25.

7 Mark Raider and Shulamit Reinharz. *American Jewish Women and the Zionist Enterprise*. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2005).

The Jewish Communal Settlements in Palestine.⁸ Written by Anna E. Hartog and published by the executive office of the American Habonim movement in 1945, the book intended to educate young pioneers on the life that faced them in Palestine. In describing the kibbutz, Hartog wrote "all able-bodied members of working age in the kibbutz work, and as far as possible they engage in manual labor. There is no social differentiation whatsoever between the various types of work. Women are found in all fields except the night watch and a few other tasks which are either too strenuous or too dangerous."⁹ Her vision presented a picture of perfect equality with women and men being equal in dignity, opportunity, and labor. She also wrote that "everyone takes turns at household and service tasks, such as kitchen work and waiting tables."¹⁰ Therefore, she claims that not only were women allowed to do work traditionally done by men but also that men shared the responsibility of work traditionally expected of women.

Another movement publication attempted to take a more nuanced view. In 1941, Habonim published *The Kvutza: The Structure, Problems, and Achievements of the Collective Settlements in Palestine* by Shalom Wurm.¹¹ The text speaks of the *kvutza*, a collective group where all are equal both in authority and in responsibility. The text is introduced as debunking various utopian myths that had sprung up involving the *kvutza*.¹² The author writes that "the youthful pioneer, preparing for his 'Aliya,' often visualizes the *kvutza* as a social Utopia which will eliminate all social problems;"

⁸ Anna E. Hartog. *The Jewish Communal Settlements in Palestine*. (New York: National Executive Habonim, Labor Zionist Youth, 1945).

⁹ Ibid, 10.

¹⁰ Ibid, 11.

¹¹ Shalom Wurm. *The Kvutza: The Structure, Problems, and Achievements of the Collective Settlements in Palestine*. (New York: National Executive Habonim, Labor Zionist Youth, 1941).

¹² Ibid, 3.

however, he seeks to study the *kvutza* “guided by the premise that there are perennial social problems which reappear in diverse forms in all human society.”¹³ Therefore, when it comes to explaining the status of women in the *kvutza*, Wurm acknowledges that the road to equality has been a bumpy one, yet he still concludes that women and men enjoy equal dignity in the current *kvutza* system. Wurm wrote that “women have achieved a great measure of personal independence in the *kvutza*. They are not confined to routine female occupations.”¹⁴ This claim reads much like the claim offered by Hartog four years later. Wurm states that “from the very beginning of the cooperative movement women were inspired by the idea of complete equality and the *kvutza* has always endeavored to satisfy this desire.”¹⁵

While Wurm asserts that women were always included in the promise of equality, he does concede that the endeavor to make the expectation a reality was not immediately successful. He notes that “in the beginning, when the number of women was very small, they were naturally given the traditional women's duties.”¹⁶ Here Wurm comes off as reactionary by claiming that it is natural to assign women to their traditional duties. He notes that these early women pioneers were dissatisfied with how little their lives had changed in joining the *kvutza*, but he argues that they at least became independent of their husbands; thus, gaining some, though not perfect, equality.¹⁷ Wurm writes that early attempts to bring about equality between men and

13 Shalom Wurm. *The Kvutza: The Structure, Problems, and Achievements of the Collective Settlements in Palestine*. (New York: National Executive Habonim, Labor Zionist Youth, 1941): 3-4.

14 Ibid, 55.

15 Ibid, 55.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

women involved men taking on jobs traditionally reserved for women rather than women taking over the labor of men.¹⁸ However, Wurm claims that as the *kvutzot* grew, women soon became “absorbed in the work in the vineyards, in the citrus groves and in the vegetable gardens.”¹⁹ He writes that “their inferiority feeling was thus in a great measure eliminated” as a result.²⁰

Wurm then turns his attention to “a certain number of exceptional women who, even in the early difficult days, insisted upon standing side by side with the men in their most strenuous labor. Many of these have achieved positions of great prestige in the general public life of the land.”²¹ This statement reads like something of a backwards compliment. On the one hand, it lauds the achievements of women who took on the same difficult tasks as men. On the other, it implies that such women are the exception and not the rule. It at once calls for the recognition that women can excel in the same ways men can while implying that not all women are up to the challenge. Nevertheless, it puts forward the claim that women can achieve equality in the *kvutza* and that such equality is a positive achievement of the new society. It is an invitation to break boundaries while being an acknowledgment that such boundaries still exist.

Wurm places the blame for this imperfection not on the men of the *kvutza* but on what he refers to as the “social heritage of passivity” amongst women.²² He implies that women have yet to liberate themselves from entrenched power dynamics. Wurm notes

18 Shalom Wurm. *The Kvutza: The Structure, Problems, and Achievements of the Collective Settlements in Palestine*. (New York: National Executive Habonim, Labor Zionist Youth, 1941): 55.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid, 56.

that some *kvutzot* attempted to address the perceived problem of women's passivity by establishing quotas for women in *kvutza* positions. This solution met with resistance from many women who believed that such quotas actually undermined equality. They argued that women should be put in positions based on merit just as men were rather than because of special considerations.²³

Wurm provides an overview of the areas in which women excelled in the *kvutza*. It includes a list of duties that seem to fall close to the traditional realm of women but also several roles that would have been entirely out of reach in any traditional society. Wurm claims that women are "in charge of cultural activities, in educational committees, in secretariats, in health councils" and participate in the beautification of the *kvutza*.²⁴ Culture, education, nursing, and gardening are hardly radical departures from the traditional realm of "women's work," but Wurm also writes that "women were trained in the use of firearms and were permitted to participate in the dangerous and delicate task of the night watch."²⁵ Defending the community and training to use weapons was certainly a task reserved for men in the traditional societies of the time. In addition to defense work, Wurm notes that "women have been replacing men in work with tractors and other heavy labor."²⁶ In terms of administration, Wurm writes that women "are represented in the comity in charge of labor," the comity with the power of assigning task to members of the *kvutza*.²⁷

23 Shalom Wurm. *The Kvutza: The Structure, Problems, and Achievements of the Collective Settlements in Palestine*. (New York: National Executive Habonim, Labor Zionist Youth, 1941): 56.

24 Ibid 56-57.

25 Ibid, 56.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

While noting the progress toward equality in the *kvutza* model, Wurm asserts that “there are women who feel that they have already achieved the principle of equality and that further efforts must lead to a renunciation of 'womanhood.'”²⁸ This distinction demonstrates that Labor Zionism did not seek to erase all differences between women and men. It shows that the ideology sought equality of power rather than to make men and women exactly the same. Wurm claims that the women of the *kvutza* “must not forget that there are certain spiritual functions specific to womanhood. They feel that motherliness, tenderness, softening of relationships may give way to rudeness if women push themselves beyond the common-sense limitations.”²⁹ While Wurm claims that these are beliefs held by women, he is still putting a limit on how close women and men can come to equality. He is claiming that women are still subject to limitations in the new society Labor Zionists are building. It is easy to see how such a condescending caveat could leave room for the continued inequality of men and women. Wurm sums up his report on women in the *kvutza* by stating “on the whole, it is correct to say that women in the *kvutza* are equal partners in a great many manifestations of social life. The only 'defect' of those women who are dissatisfied with their place is that they want to do more and more. They feel that they are building a new world, and they want not only to hand over the bricks but also to lay them in place themselves.”³⁰ Here, Wurm offers only a qualified statement on equality and accuses women who remained dissatisfied of being defective. He is critical of women’s ambitions and seems to offer them only a partial

28 Shalom Wurm. *The Kvutza: The Structure, Problems, and Achievements of the Collective Settlements in Palestine*. (New York: National Executive Habonim, Labor Zionist Youth, 1941): 56.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid, 57.

share in the work of building the Zionist utopia. This rhetoric stands at odds with much of the movement's statements concerning true equality among all members.

In addition to movement publications like those written by Hartog and Wurm, expectations for women were communicated in a magazine, newspaper, and film propaganda blitz initiated by the various Zionist organizations of the 1930s.³¹ Habonim published the *Haboneh* magazine to keep members up to date on movement developments and to inspire immigration to Palestine.³² In addition to the print sources available to perspective immigrants, the World Zionist Organization began to produce films depicting the adventure and excitement of settlement in Palestine during the 1930s.³³ These recruitment films “emphasized the role of women in the Yishuv and showcased *haluzot* as proof of Zionism’s modern and egalitarian attitude to gender relations.”³⁴ One such film was *The Land of Promise*, released by the World Zionist organization in 1935.³⁵ *The Land of Promise* is narrated in English and aimed at American audiences. The film prominently displays pioneer women marching off to work side-by-side with their male comrades. They are shown in work clothes laboring to build roads with picks and shovels in the hot sun. They are shown harvesting fields, milking cows, tending gardens, working the factories, tilling the soil. The narrator announces that “the women pioneers of Palestine demand and obtain an equal share of the hardest work. On the land they are ploughwomen, stonebreakers, road workers and

31 Mark A. Raider, “Girded for the Superhuman Task: American Jews and the Trope of the Zionist Pioneer, 1925–1956.” *American Jewish History* 103, no. 3 (2009): 321.

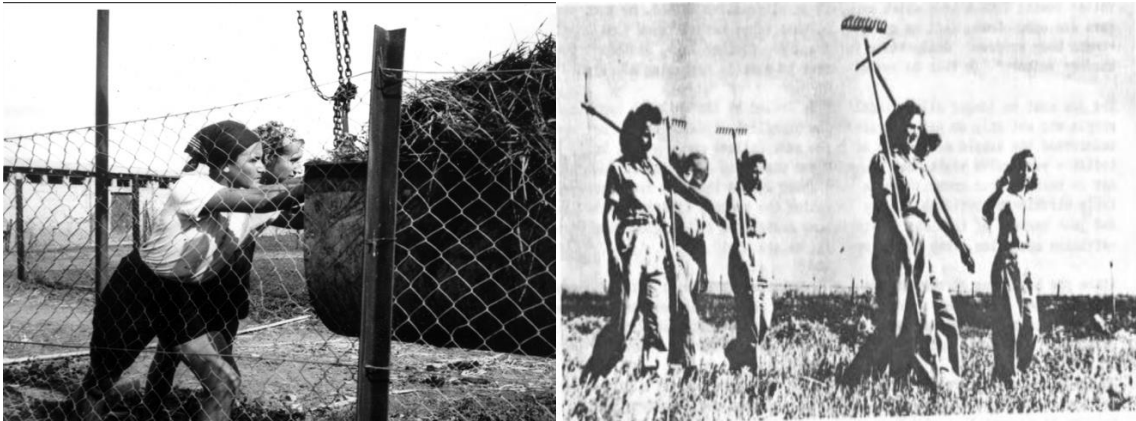
32 David Breslau. *Arise and Build: The Story of American Habonim*. (New York: Ichud Habonim Labor Zionist Youth, 1961), 24.

33 Mark A. Raider, “Girded for the Superhuman Task: American Jews and the Trope of the Zionist Pioneer, 1925–1956.” *American Jewish History* 103, no. 3 (2009): 321.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

in the cities they are masons, bricklayers, and builders.”³⁶ The film seeks to inspire would-be immigrants to Palestine by showing the creation of a new and powerful type of Jew. The film emphasizes both the return to the soil by Jews and their technological achievements. In these endeavors, the film always portrays women as an equal part in the exciting project of settling the land. Thus, women are included in the pioneering archetype as full partners capable of any task.



Depictions of women pioneers in *The Land of Promise*

It is important to compare depictions of women in movement publications and films with their actual experiences as pioneers in the land of Israel. Golda Meir, Israel’s first female prime minister, was an early member of the American Labor Zionist Movement. At that time, the principal goal of the movement was to prepare young Jews for settlement in Palestine. Thus, in 1921, after an active career in the Milwaukee branch of the movement, Meir and her young husband immigrated to the Mandate of Palestine where they pursued their goal of working on a *kibbutz*. Upon their arrival at Kibbutz Merhavia, the couple faced resistance. Meir tells us that one reason for the rejection of

³⁶ *The Land of Promise*, directed by Juda Leman (1935; Jerusalem: Urim Palestine Film Company LTD).

their offer to join the *kibbutz* was “that this community of unmarried men and women did not at that time want families. Babies were a luxury the young kibbutz could not afford.”³⁷ Immediately, Meir’s status as a woman was a stumbling block for the *kibbutz*. Rather than seeing her as a worker, the members of Merhavia’s first impression of Golda Meir was as a potential mother who would only create a burden for the collective.

Meir also faced resistance from the women who were already on the *kibbutz* because “they could not imagine that an American girl would do the hard-physical work required.”³⁸ The veteran women, themselves inured to the hardship of *kibbutz* life, believed that Meir’s upbringing in America could not possibly have prepared her for the pioneer’s life. Despite the resistance of the *kibbutz* members, the Meirs were allowed to prove their worth during a trial period. During the trial period, Meir was tasked with sitting on the board of the threshing machine while it threshed the grain.³⁹ This task further demonstrates the low expectations the members of the *kibbutz* had for Meir. It is clear that they did not yet trust her to do complex or strenuous tasks. Meir writes that her “efforts at work did not make as great an impression on the young men as the phonograph and records” she had brought from America.⁴⁰

It is notable that while she earlier mentioned that she was being judged by both the women and the men of the *kibbutz*, in writing about the evaluation of her work, Meir only mentions the men. She writes that “they would have been happy to accept the

37 Golda Meir, “From Milwaukee to Merhavia, 1921: They Couldn’t Imagine an American Girl Would Do the Work” in *Builders and Dreamers: Habonim Labor Zionist Youth Movement in North America*, ed. J.J. Goldberg and Elliot King (New York: Herzl Press, 1993), 42.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid 42.

phonograph as a dowry without the bride who owned it.”⁴¹ Thus, in the end it was not her abilities as a potential laborer that won the men’s acceptance but the possessions she could offer the collective. This vetting process takes a marked departure from the egalitarian rhetoric of the Labor Zionist movement. Meir is judged not for her potential as a pioneer and worker but instead as a potential mother and by the possessions she can offer.

It is unsurprising then that once she was accepted into the *kibbutz* that Meir was “careful not to make any slip expected of an American girl.”⁴² Being a woman and an American meant that Meir was held to a higher standard than other members of the *kibbutz*. On Merhavia, women did work in the fields; however, unlike the men, this work was done in addition to work in the kitchen. After long days digging deep holes into the rocky sides of hills to plant trees, Meir resisted the powerful urge to wash and rest. Instead she went immediately to help in the kitchens.⁴³ Meir wrote that kitchen work was so grueling that the woman whose turn it was for kitchen duty often became depressed; however, Meir never found kitchen work demeaning. Despite the extra work expected from women on the *kibbutz*, Meir was still able to achieve the Labor Zionist ideal of finding dignity in labor.

Despite the expectation that she take on the extra duties expected of women in addition to those done by men, the members of the *kibbutz* criticized Meir for acting in ways that were seen to be feminine. When Meir bought glass cups rather than enamel

41 Golda Meir, “From Milwaukee to Merhavia, 1921: They Couldn’t Imagine an American Girl Would Do the Work” in *Builders and Dreamers: Habonim Labor Zionist Youth Movement in North America*, ed. J.J. Goldberg and Elliot King (New York: Herzl Press, 1993), 42.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid, 43.

mugs for the *kibbutz* or when she put out a white tablecloth in the communal dining room on Friday nights or even when she ironed her clothes, the other members of the *kibbutz* mocked her for showing bourgeois weakness.⁴⁴ This suggests that in order for Meir to be accepted by her comrades, she not only had to do double duty but she also was expected to give up her femininity. Meir refused to do this. She believed that finding dignity in labor was not contingent on modifying her own gender expression.

Meir was far from the only woman to leave her experiences for posterity. In 1931, approximately 30 years into the project of building a Jewish state in Palestine, Rahel Kaznelson-Rubashov decided to take stock of the role women had played in the pioneering project. To do so she collected the writings of 50 women who had immigrated to Palestine and were engaged in agricultural work.⁴⁵ The collection was distributed both in the Mandate and in the United States by the Pioneer Women's Organization. Rahel Kaznelson-Rubashov intended that the collection of documents not only constitute a record for posterity but also hoped that they would act as a guide and an inspiration for those considering becoming pioneers.⁴⁶ The documents tell a complex story of the enthusiasm, determination, hopes, disappointments, and struggles of these young women who left behind their families and set out to create a new world. While not all of the contributors to *The Plough Women* were veterans of the American branch of the Labor Movement, their stories as newcomers nevertheless reflect the experiences of

44 Golda Meir, "From Milwaukee to Merhaviva, 1921: They Couldn't Imagine an American Girl Would Do the Work" in *Builders and Dreamers: Habonim Labor Zionist Youth Movement in North America*, ed. J.J. Goldberg and Elliot King (New York: Herzl Press, 1993), 43.

45 Rahel Kaznelson-Rubashov, introduction to *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), xxx.

46 Ibid.

the American *halutz*. Furthermore, because the *Plough Women* was rapidly translated into English and widely distributed by the American branch of the Pioneer Women's Organization, it is almost certain that the book would have been read by the young American Labor Zionists who constituted the book's target audience. In its pages, would-be pioneers found unfiltered accounts of life as a woman within the Labor Zionist movement in Palestine.

A young *halutz* named Batya Brenner contributed a piece to the *Plough Woman* entitled "I Became a Worker." The piece tells the story of how she came to join an agricultural *kvutza*. Batya was born in Russia and went to Palestine at a young age to join her older siblings. True to the fashion of young Labor Zionists at that time, Brenner sought a life of work. However, when she applied for work in a *kvutza*, she was at first rudely turned down. Only intervention by her older brother secured her a place in a *kvutza* and even then only as a cook. This experience clashed with Brenner's expectation that in a *kvutza* "everyone works like everyone else."⁴⁷ When Brenner arrived at the *kvutza*, her appearance was the first thing commented on by the men. As Brenner took up her duties of cooking and sweeping, her mistakes often drew the ire of her male comrades. When her sweeping kicked up too much dust, one commented "you're not a girl at all... Don't even know how to sweep?"⁴⁸ This comment firmly equates Brenner's status as a woman with certain traditional female duties. As Brenner's failures in the kitchen piled up, she was moved to a job as a washerwoman. The other woman in the *kvutza* had fallen ill, and since then no washing had been done in weeks. This refusal of

⁴⁷ Batya Brenner, "I Became a Worker," in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 51.

⁴⁸ Ibid 55.

the men to do their own washing demonstrates that the *kvutza* had yet to break the boundaries between the traditional tasks of men and women. In fact, the men preferred to wear dirty clothes for weeks rather than to do a task they believed was the duty of a woman. This refusal suggests that “women’s work” did not carry the same dignity of labor as work in the fields. Therefore, as long as women’s work was segregated from men’s work, women could not enjoy the dignity of labor that the movement sought to foster. Nevertheless, Brenner took great pride in her washing. When she rubbed the skin of her hands off in the course of her work and was ordered by the nurse to take three days off, she became miserable until she could work again.

When it came to gender roles, Brenner’s *kvutza* followed a pattern similar to life in a traditional village. Brenner and the other female member of the *kvutza*, Hasidah, stayed in the kitchen all day preparing food and washing clothing for the men out working in the fields; however, when one of the men fell sick, Brenner got her chance to become a ploughwoman.⁴⁹ She wrote that when it was suggested that she go out into the field to work, “there was much laughter and yet, in the end, they had to take me because there was no one else.”⁵⁰ Despite the initial reservations of her male comrades, Brenner was overjoyed to have a chance to work in the fields. Once the members of the *kvutza* decided that Brenner would work in the fields, the men invited her over to their table. While Brenner’s performance in the kitchen had been ridiculed, her performance in the field won the respect of her male comrades. When Brenner returned from her first day in the field, Hasidah observed, “Just a girl like all the others. Out there, in the fields,

49 Batya Brenner, “I Became a Worker,” in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 58.

50 Ibid.

among the boys, she becomes another person. And all the kitchen work falls on me again.”⁵¹ Hasidah observed a transformation in Brenner in which the young woman appeared to transcend her womanhood and become fully accepted as a worker. She resented this transformation because it left her once more to be the woman of the *kvutza*. Brenner was hurt by Hasidah’s complaint. Brenner reflected that “she calls me ‘little girl,’ but I want to be a worker.”⁵² This dichotomy between girl and worker did not exist in Brenner’s mind when she first set out to work in the *kvutza* believing that “everyone works like everyone else.”⁵³ Her actual experience failed to live up to her expectation of a fully egalitarian society. She was allowed to work in the fields, but her acceptance by the men led to resentment by Hasidah and in turn led to Brenner’s disillusionment. While she had been thrilled by her work in the field, Hasidah’s stinging remark made Brenner decide to leave the *kvutza*. Although she had managed to succeed as a field hand and win the respect of the men of the *kvutza*, Brenner could not win Hasidah’s approval without returning to the kitchen.

Another account of the fight to win the respect of male pioneers comes from Tehiyah Lieberman who wrote “Women Build Houses” for the *Plough Woman*. In the 1920s, Zionist pioneers became active in construction to build the newborn city of Tel Aviv. Lieberman writes “thousands of Jews had entered the building trade and had mastered it. And the Jewish woman worker began to batter at the doors of the trade. But

51 Batya Brenner, “I Became a Worker,” in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 58.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid 51.

it was not easy to get in.”⁵⁴ This statement contrasts the expectations of women workers with the reality of their experience. At the time, they felt that any work being done by their male counterparts ought to be work they could participate in; however, they could not take this right for granted and had to force their way in. Lieberman writes that “the men had quite a number of reasons for keeping us out. Some said the work was too strenuous for women. Others argued that if women were admitted into the building trade communes, which contracted for work as a group, the output would decrease and the pay with it. The women were not very sure themselves, but they pressed hard for admission.”⁵⁵ Here the men are claiming the right to make decisions about what women are capable of. Some take the condescending line that the work is too difficult for women and that they will slow down the work of the collective. Others take the view that if women are allowed to join the men in construction, their numbers will drive down wages, a fear somewhat at odds with the communalistic goals of the Labor Movement. Lieberman notes that the women themselves were not sure they would be up to the task, but they demanded the equal chance to attempt the work anyway.

In light of the ongoing debate, the local workers’ council ordered that every building *kvutza* had to admit two women. Lieberman was picked to be one of the members, but she resented the fact that she was received “not spontaneously, but under orders.”⁵⁶ Lieberman was bewildered by the resistance of the men. She wrote “aren’t there, among men, too, the strong and the weak, the efficient and the inefficient.”⁵⁷ She

54 Tehiyah Lieberman, “Women Build Houses,” in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 140.

55 Ibid, 140.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

saw no reason why a woman should be held to any other standard. Her surprise stemmed from her experience on the training farm that had prepared her for immigration to Palestine where she had worked “on a footing of absolute equality with the men.”⁵⁸ These preparations ended up not being reflected in the attitudes of the men she worked with in Palestine. Lieberman writes “I used to think, we will establish the same equality in Eretz Israel. But when I got here I could not stand the amused irony, the patronizing, superior attitude of the stronger toward the weaker.”⁵⁹ Much like Brenner, Lieberman’s expectations of equality were undermined by the actual situation she experienced. It is also notable that Lieberman identifies the men patronizing her as the stronger and women as the weaker as she herself is fighting this traditional dichotomy.

When Lieberman first showed up to the building *kvutza*, she was derided by the men who were astonished that a woman had come to do the work.⁶⁰ At first she was given the easiest task of the day. When she complained about her unequal treatment, the men patronizingly asked Lieberman “What other kind of work can we give a woman?”⁶¹ Clearly, the men of her *kvutza* were not ready to accept a woman as an equally capable worker. Nevertheless, Lieberman took her place beside the men carrying cement. At first the men were dismissive of Lieberman’s attempt to do an even share of the work. One of the men remarked, “let her lift this a couple of times-she’ll be asking

58 Tehiyah Lieberman, “Women Build Houses,” in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 140.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid, 141.

for something easier.”⁶² Leiberson did in fact struggle to lift the cement but she persisted in doing the work. She could feel the eyes of the men on her just waiting for her to fail so she worked as hard as she could not to falter.⁶³ In spite of the condescension and dismissiveness of the men of her *kvutza*, Leiberson was able to win their respect when she proved she was every bit as effective a worker as they were. Leiberson wrote “my reputation as a good worker was soon established, and I was looked upon as one of the best.”⁶⁴ She was even nominated to the workers’ council in recognition of her skill. Leiberson was able to win the respect she deserved but it took her a great deal of effort to overcome a gendered double standard. Her experiences in the training farm had led her to believe that men and women were equal in Palestine, yet her efforts at securing the same work as men were initially met with derision. She wrote in her account in the *Plough Woman* “to help make clear the struggle that the women of Eretz Israel had to wage when trying to break into a new field.”⁶⁵ Thus, her account can be read as a counterpoint to the more optimistic narrative being spun by movement publications and being put forth on the training farms.

While Tehiyah Lieberman and Batya Brenner contributed the stories of their personal experience, Rahel Yanait Ben-Zvi contributed more general observations on the state of women’s role in the movement to the *Plough Woman*. She writes that “in the thick of that passionate movement towards the land, the women workers suddenly found themselves thrust aside and relegated once more to the ancient tradition of the

62 Tehiyah Lieberman, “Women Build Houses,” in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 141.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid, 142.

65 Ibid.

house and the kitchen.”⁶⁶ This statement demonstrates once more the gap between the movement’s progressive trumpeting of equality in a new system of labor and the reality in the land. She writes that the women were “amazed and disappointed to see how the cleavage was opening, the men comrades really uniting themselves with the land, but they, though on it, not becoming part of it.”⁶⁷ Here Ben-Zvi echoes the surprise felt by Leiberson when she was first confronted by the condescension of her male comrades. Ben-Zvi also captures the disappointment felt by Brenner when she was denied work on the land. The entire goal of the Labor Zionist movement was to reconnect to the sacred land of Israel through labor, yet women were being denied the opportunity to realize this dream. While the men worked the land and rebuilt the longed-for connection to it, the women remained stuck in their traditional roles.

Ben-Zvi also writes about the disappointment the women of the Labor Zionist Movement felt when they were denied the chance to participate in the defense of the Jewish people during WWI. During the war, she writes “For the men there was the front and for the women, again, disappointment. There were hundreds of women who reported for duty with the Jewish Legion, just like men. Of course, they were not taken. That rebuff left us flat and wearied; we were not to participate in the great moment.”⁶⁸ Once more, when the women of the Labor Zionist movement showed up expecting the promise of equality to be honored, they were rebuffed. Just as it stung to be left out of the historical rebirth of the land of Israel, it deeply upset the women of the movement to

66 Rahel Yanait Ben-Zvi, “Stages,” in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 109.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid, 110.

be left out of the defense of their new homeland. It is notable that Ben-Zvi takes a tone of resignation when it comes to the refusal of the Jewish Legion to accept women. It seems that unlike Brenner and Leiberson, she had already come to expect the persistence of inequality. Ben-Zvi concludes by stating “in no form of Palestinian life does the woman play her proper role economically, culturally, and spiritually.”⁶⁹ Here she claims that the proper role of women is one of equality with men, and by denying them equal opportunity to fulfil the same role in society, the Labor Zionist Movement is leaving women short of their full potential.

The Labor Zionist Movement promised women full equality in the project to build a socialist utopia in the land of Israel, yet the experiences of the women who pursued a new life in Palestine showed these promises to be hollow. While women like Golda Meir, Batya Brenner, and Tehiyah Lieberman did manage to win the respect of their male colleagues and earn the right to do the hard physical labor of building the new state, they had to overcome the barriers laid in their path by men who were not yet able to accept women as equals. Examining the disparity that existed within the Labor Zionist Movement in the decades before 1948 between the stated ideology of gender equality and the actual experience of women pioneers, provides insight into a variety of progressive movements both in that era and going forward. This research serves as an important reminder never to take a movement at its own word when it comes to the promises it makes. Furthermore, it serves as more evidence of the deeply ingrained nature of traditional values especially concerning gendered forms of work or labor. The

69 Rahel Yanait Ben-Zvi, “Stages,” in *The Plough Woman: Records of the Pioneer Women of Palestine*, ed. Mark Raider & Miriam Raider-Roth (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 115.

young men and women of the Labor Zionist Movement rejected all of the values of traditional society, yet when it came time to put their ideas into action, the traditional values they had been raised with were evident in their behaviors. Long standing beliefs, like those concerning the role of women, are hard to wipe away even when it comes to the most committed of revolutionaries.

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